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ABSTRACT

This document reports findings of a California Department of Education (DOE) study that examined grade-retention practices in the state. Data were collected primarily through surveys of schools and school districts. Findings indicate that approximately 1 in 10 students spent an extra year in school before second grade during the 1988-89 school year. In kindergarten and first grade, the retention rates for African-Americans and Hispanics were up to double the rate for whites. The most common treatment for retained students was grade repetition. Despite research findings to the contrary, most educators believed that retention was effective. Many educators used Light's Retention Scale, an instrument that lacks reliability and validity in identifying students for retention. The following alternatives to retention are identified--dissemination of research, developmentally appropriate instruction, the Reading Recovery Program, other intervention programs, the Success for All Program, and structural changes (such as combination classes, year-round education, and ungraded schools). Several recommendations are offered to reduce the statewide retention rate: (1) School districts and schools should examine their policies and practices in light of current research; (2) school districts and schools should disseminate research on retention to elementary and middle school staffs; (3) school districts with high retention rates should develop a plan to reduce the rate and improve the instructional program for at-risk students; (4) school districts should monitor the differential effects of retention for different ethnic groups, non-English-speaking children, and boys and girls; and (5) the DOE and state legislature should provide support to school districts to implement early intervention reading programs. Two figures are included. (LMI)

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SUMMARY REPORT

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SUMMARY REPORT

Beyond Retention

A Study of Retention Rates, Practices, and Successful Alternatives in California

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Introduction to the Report

RETENTION, THE PRACTICE OF REQUIRING A STUDENT TO REPEAT A GRADE, has a long history. A national study (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990) reported that 18 percent of students in public and private schools (or about one student in six) had repeated at least one grade by the end of grade eight. Some situations in which retention has been used are as follows:

- The parents of Eric, a four-year-old boy with an October birthday, are told by his kindergarten teacher that their son is not as mature as the other children. The teacher suggests that the parents enroll Eric in a two-year developmental kindergarten program.
- Allison is recommended for retention at the end of the first grade because she is a nonreader and because she had performed at the low end of her first-grade class in most subjects.
- Jake is recommended for retention at the end of fifth grade. He had missed over three weeks of school because of a series of family problems and had performed poorly on the district proficiency test.

Because of the growing interest in retention and the lack of systematic knowledge about retention practices in the state, the California Department of Education decided to examine retention practices in California. Its study, conducted in 1991, centered on three questions:

- What is the retention rate in California?
- What are school district and school practices regarding retention?
- What strategies have school districts and schools used to reduce their retention rate?

Data were collected primarily through surveys of retention practices in schools and school districts. The following is a summary of the findings contained in the full report, *Beyond Retention: A Study of Retention Rates, Practices, and Successful Alternatives in California* (George, 1991).[1] The reader is referred to the 1991 report for a description of the methodology and the complete set of results.

[1] Requests for copies of the full report should be addressed to Catherine George, Consultant, Special Studies and Evaluation Reports Unit, California Department of Education, P.O. Box 944272, Sacramento, CA 94244-2720; telephone 916-657-2881.

Department of Education Activities Related to Retention

This research report is one of several recent documents prepared by the California Department of Education addressing the issue of retention. In 1991 the Department issued a program advisory, "Retention of Students in the Elementary and Middle Grades" (California Department of Education, 1991). On the basis of an accumulated body of research, the advisory stated, the Department had determined that retention as a means of preventing failure in school is ineffective. Although retention may benefit students in isolated cases, the Department indicated, it has not benefited the vast majority of students affected. Another document, *It's Elementary! Elementary Grades Task Force Report* (1992), also recommended that schools avoid retention. In addition, *Here They Come: Ready or Not! Report of the School Readiness Task Force* argued against the retention of kindergartners.

Review of Research on Retention

An analysis of the research on retention indicates that retention is educationally counterproductive. The results of over 40 statistically integrated studies revealed that students who repeated a grade performed less well than matched groups of promoted students in academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, and attitude toward school (Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989). The placement of students in two-year kindergarten and first-grade classes, frequently done for immature students, has also been shown to be ineffective (Gredler, 1984; Shepard, 1989). In addition, retained students are up to 30 percent more likely than promoted students to drop out of school by grade nine, even after the effects of student background, gender, and achievement are controlled (Grissom and Shepard, 1989).

Why Does Retention Continue?

Retention continues despite research evidence indicating that the practice is ineffective. Teachers base their belief in the efficacy of retention on their observations that students seem to do better during the year in which the grade is repeated. However, teachers are unable to see the longitudinal effects of retention, particularly dropping out; nor can they estimate how the student would have done if he or she had been promoted. As the research indicates, students may do better during the year in which they repeat a grade; but the positive effects do not persist over time.

Districts are funded by the state for the costs of educating students when a grade is repeated—more than $84 million annually for kindergarten retention alone. A variety of state and federal programs, such as Chapter 1 and the School Improvement Program, are available to help improve the effectiveness of the educational program for students at risk of failure and other students. However, no money is specifically targeted to help schools implement alterna-

tive strategies to reduce the retention rate. Under the current system, schools may lack resources for serving the lowest-achieving and most immature students and may retain them because no better alternative seems apparent.

District Policies on Retention

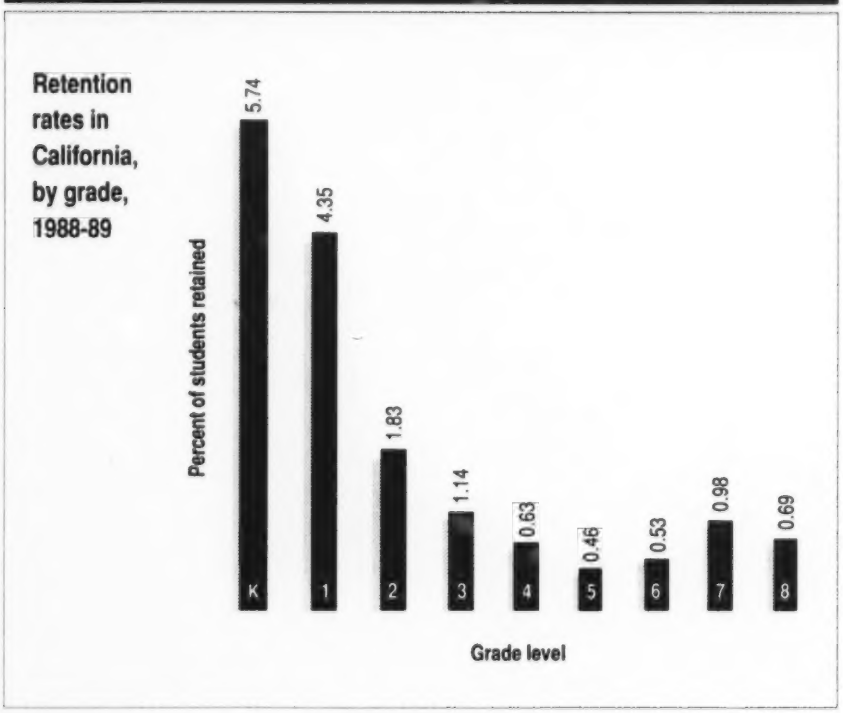
Education Code Section 48070 requires school districts to develop a policy on the retention of students. When a sample of the policies was reviewed, existing district policies were found to do little to dissuade schools from continuing the practice of retention. Only one of the 114 elementary school and unified school district policies that were examined clearly cautioned against the use of retention because of negative research findings. Generally, district policies provided flexibility to schools to make decisions on retention within a general framework provided by the district. The sample policies and regulations developed by the California School Boards Association had the single greatest influence on district policies. In January, 1992, the association released new sample policies and regulations consistent with the research findings and the Department's position on retention.[2]

[2] School districts may request a copy of this policy (BP 5123 [a]) from the California School Boards Association; telephone (916) 371-4691, Ext. 48.

Retention Rates in Elementary Schools and Middle Schools

DATA ON RETENTION WERE COLLECTED FROM A SAMPLE OF DISTRICTS IN California and then analyzed to estimate statewide retention rates. Retention rates for kindergarten through grade eight for the 1988-89 school year are shown in Figure 1. The highest rate of retention was in kindergarten (5.74), where about one in every 17 students was retained. In first grade the retention rate was 4.35 or about one in every 23 students. Because the same students rarely repeat both kindergarten and first grade, the rates for the two grades can be aggregated to estimate the number of students retained before second grade. Approximately one in every ten students spends an extra year in school before second grade.

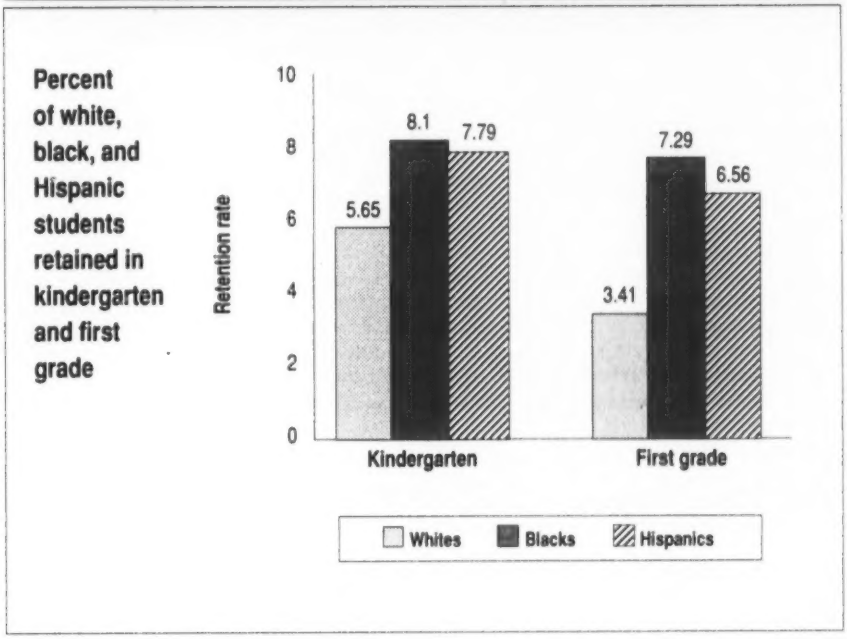
FIGURE 1



Retention Rates, by Ethnic Group

Ethnic groups differ significantly in the percent of students retained. Because retention is most prevalent in kindergarten and first grade, the retention rates for those two grades are displayed in Figure 2 for the three largest ethnic groups. The rates for blacks and Hispanics are up to double the rate for whites.

FIGURE 2



Retention Rates, by Gender

Nationally, 21 percent of males and 14 percent of females had been retained by grade eight in 1988 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990). The data in California exhibited a similar trend, showing proportionally greater retentions of male students at all grade levels.

Retention Practices

THE DATA ON RETENTION PRACTICES WERE COLLECTED FROM A SURVEY OF A sample of school district personnel and elementary school and middle school principals. The data were collected in 1990—before the Department prepared a program advisory cautioning districts against retention.

Reasons for Retention

School principals were asked to rate the relative importance of 13 characteristics in making decisions about retention. Generally, it was found, students are retained in elementary schools because they lack basic academic skills or lack developmental readiness or have unsatisfactory reading skills for their age group. The attitude of a student's parents toward retention was also given a great deal of emphasis in making retention decisions. Students retained once were unlikely to be retained twice.

In middle schools and junior high schools, the most critical factors indicating a need for retention were poor grades, a lack of basic academic skills, emotional immaturity, and parental attitudes regarding retention.

Use of Standardized Tests and Scales

School personnel were queried regarding the use of various instruments in making decisions about retention. The instrument reportedly given the greatest consideration in making retention decisions in elementary schools is *Light's Retention Scale*.[3] Fifty-three percent of elementary schools administered the scale, and 26 percent indicated that they gave the scale major consideration in making retention decisions. The widespread use of *Light's Retention Scale* in California relates most likely to the reference to the scale in earlier issues of the *Sample Administrative Regulations* (AR 5123) prepared by the California School Boards Association. However, the sample regulations disseminated by the association in 1992 cautioned districts against the use of *Light's Retention Scale i*n making decisions on retention.

Standardized achievement tests and reading placement tests were also widely used in making retention decisions in elementary schools, but few schools reported using developmental tests for that purpose.

Because of the widespread use of *Light's Retention Scale*, the Department conducted a technical review of the scale.[4] No empirical evidence was

[3] See H. W. Light, *Light's Retention Scale*. Novato, Calif.: Academic Therapy Publications, 1986, 1991.
[4] J. Grissom, "Review of *Light's Retention Scale*." Sacramento: California Department of Education, Program Evaluation and Research Division, 1991.

found that the scale can identify students who will benefit from retention. Because the scale lacks demonstrated reliability and validity, it is recommended that the scale *not be used* to identify students for retention.[5]

Treatment for Retained Students

The most common treatment for retained students is simply to have them repeat a grade. About half the elementary schools reported that they provide special services, such as those authorized under Chapter 1, for retained students.

About one-third of the school districts in the state offer some type of a two-year program in kindergarten or first grade. Typically, districts have a few of these classes and bus children to them from neighboring schools if necessary. Although none of the large districts in the state indicated that they offered a two-year kindergarten program, 29 percent had a pre-first-grade program.

Perceived Effectiveness of Retention

Educators were asked about the perceived effectiveness of retention. Despite the negative research literature, most elementary school and middle school educators persisted in thinking that retention is effective. District administrators followed the same pattern but rated retention as slightly less effective than school principals did.

Interest in Reducing Retention

School districts were asked in 1990 about their interest in reducing retention. About 40 percent of the districts indicated that they were making a concerted effort to reduce retention. In contrast, about 23 percent of the districts indicated that they were satisfied with their retention practices and had not tried to reduce retention. Small districts were more likely to be satisfied with their retention rate.

Strategies Used to Reduce Retention

School districts were asked about the strategies used to reduce retention. The most frequently mentioned strategies are listed as follows:

- Early intervention
- Referral of students to child study teams
- Use of specialist teachers, such as resource specialists and Miller-Unruh reading teachers
- Peer tutoring and after-school tutoring
- Parent involvement, including parent conferences and ongoing contact with teachers
- Special programs, such as Chapter 1 and the Miller-Unruh Reading Program

[5] See the California Department of Education's program advisory, "Retention of Students in the Elementary and Middle Grades" (Program Advisory CIL 91/92-02, September 16, 1991).

Early intervention for students at risk of failure was frequently mentioned by district and elementary school personnel as a strategy preferred to retention. Interventions seemed to be tailored to the needs of the individual students involved and were frequently suggested by a student study team that discussed the child's problems. For example, in one school a guidance committee was used to discuss individual children and give the classroom teacher ideas about how to modify a child's curriculum to meet the child's needs more effectively.

Peer tutoring, after-school tutoring, and parent involvement, including increased parent-teacher communication, parent education, and parent-directed homework programs, were also services provided to students at risk of failure. Schools that had such special programs as Chapter 1 or the Miller-Unruh Reading Program used these programs to provide special services.

The most common obstacles districts reported in reducing retention were staff members who considered retention beneficial for students and parents and staff who wanted to maintain current grade-level expectations for student performance. Districts also felt constrained by large class sizes and a need for more money for special programs. Other districts cited a lack of successful strategies for working effectively with students less prepared than their peers and with such student characteristics as mobility.

Alternatives to Retention

INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS regarding strategies used to reduce retention and serve the needs of students more effectively. Among the strategies identified were the following:

- Dissemination of research on retention
- Developmentally appropriate instruction
- Reading Recovery Program and other reading intervention programs
- Success for All Program
- Combination classes, year-round education, and ungraded schools

The discussion of alternatives should give educators examples of exemplary strategies that might be considered. The listing is not intended to be exhaustive. Districts have rarely had the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of these techniques. Presented here are the beliefs and reactions of educators related to the strategies they have implemented. Districts and schools interested in implementing these or similar techniques should evaluate their effectiveness.

In any consideration of alternatives to retention, the reasons for wanting to retain a student must be examined. A successful alternative for a student retained because of immaturity will probably differ from a successful alternative for a student who demonstrates poor academic performance.

Dissemination of Research

Dramatic reductions in retention occurred when school and school district staff became aware of research demonstrating the negative effects of retention. The result seemed to happen regardless of whether the retentions were due to poor academic performance or immaturity. Principals indicated that they were able to give students the support they need within their age-appropriate classrooms, even in those cases in which the school has not concurrently made major curriculum changes. The strategy of disseminating the research was effective when it was initiated at either the district or school levels.

One relevant example involved a school in a high-performing district that had been retaining about 20 percent of the kindergarten through third grade students annually because of poor academic performance. The principal became aware of the research on retention and on developmentally appropriate instruction. The school subsequently implemented a developmental approach

to the curriculum in kindergarten through third grade over the course of several years and was retaining students only in rare instances. The school reduced the retention rate from 20 percent to less than 1 percent annually.

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction

Because a developmentally appropriate curriculum is designed to meet the needs of children at their own developmental stages, it can be effective in reducing the retention of immature children. Elementary schools in this study described how they have been influenced by recent California documents, such as *Here They Come: Ready or Not!* and national documents, such as publications of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

In developmentally appropriate instruction each child is viewed as a unique person with an individual pattern of growth. Differences in interests and development are expected and used to design curriculum. Learning occurs primarily through hands-on activities with concrete materials that reflect the interests of children. Skills are taught in the context of projects or activities consistent with a thinking, meaning-centered curriculum and not as isolated units.

Staff from schools at various stages of implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum were interviewed. Many of the schools were changing from an academically oriented kindergarten program to developmentally appropriate instruction in the early primary grades. The educators identified several factors necessary for a successful transition to a developmentally appropriate curriculum in the early primary grades: support of the district and school staff; staff training and joint teacher planning time; and new materials (e.g., manipulatives and learning center materials). Principals cautioned that the process takes time.

Reading Recovery Program

The Reading Recovery Program was developed in New Zealand and implemented statewide in Ohio and Illinois. It is designed to identify the lowest 20 percent of readers in first-grade classrooms and bring them up to the level of their peers. Identified students receive intensive one-to-one tutoring by specially trained teachers for 30 minutes daily. Individual instruction continues for an average of 12 to 14 weeks or until the student can function satisfactorily without extra help in the regular classroom. Reading Recovery teachers receive intensive training designed to help them diagnose reading problems and plan appropriate lessons.

Studies indicate that students who participated in the Reading Recovery Program scored the equivalent of 20 percentile points higher than comparison groups of children on seven measures of reading and writing at the end of first grade (Pinnell, DeFord, and Lyons, 1988). The effects of Reading Recovery

last over time. Longitudinal studies indicate that 70 to 90 percent of the participants were reading at levels comparable with their peers up to five years later. At individual sites within Ohio, the percentage of students successfully exiting the program ranged from 60 percent to 100 percent, with an average of 84 percent. Students who were not successful in Reading Recovery had lower reading scores initially; poor attendance and mobility may have also contributed to poorer outcomes for those students.

Reading Recovery offers an effective strategy for serving students with difficulty in reading. Although the program is expensive, the costs are less than those for an extra year of schooling. In addition, Reading Recovery reduces referrals to special education.

In 1991-92 California established a Reading Recovery Initiative at California State University, San Bernardino.[6] Teachers are implementing Reading Recovery in 1992-93 at 11 sites: Burlingame; CSU, San Bernardino; Fontana; Kern County; Lodi; Long Beach; Los Angeles County; Orange County; Rio Linda; San Diego County; and Yuba City. In 1993-94 three training centers will be established in California: at CSU, Fresno; at CSU, San Bernardino; and at Saint Mary's College, Moraga.

Other Reading Intervention Programs in California

Several school districts have developed their own early intervention reading programs, using techniques similar to that of Reading Recovery but with less intensive teacher training. The Central Unified School District in Fresno has had a reading intervention program for seven years. The program served the bottom one-third of readers in first grade classes in participating schools. Students were tutored individually for 30 minutes daily for 11 weeks.

The Reading Intervention Program in the Central Unified School District was supported with Chapter 1 funds. The effectiveness of the program has been studied by the district. In the first cohort students went from the seventh percentile prior to the program (fall of first grade) to the sixty-eighth percentile after completing the program (spring of first grade). The gains were maintained through grade five, in which participants scored at the fifty-eighth percentile on the reading portion of the *Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills*.

Success for All Program

The Success for All Program, initiated in the Baltimore public schools in 1987-88, is designed to ensure that every student in the low socioeconomic status schools implementing the program reaches third grade on time and performs at grade level (Slavin, Karweit, and Madden, 1989). The program

[6] For more information about the California Reading Recovery Initiative, contact Adria Klein at CSU, San Bernardino, College of Education, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407; or Beth Breneman, Consultant, California Department of Education, at (916) 657-5440.

specifically avoids the use of retention. Prior to the inception of the program, the first pilot school retained about 12 percent of students in grades one through three. In the first year of the program, only one student was retained.

Designed at Johns Hopkins University, Success for All was planned to serve low-achieving disadvantaged populations. It includes preschool and full-day kindergarten programs; beginning and intermediate reading, writing, language arts, and mathematics programs; one-to-one tutoring in reading for students (especially first graders) who need it; frequent assessment of progress in reading; and a family support program.

Success for All demonstrated its strongest results for students in the lowest quartile and for schools implementing the complete program. Because of somewhat mixed results and the indication that results improve with continued participation in the program, the effectiveness of the program should be studied over the next several years. Retention rates have reportedly dropped nearly to zero, and special education referrals have been substantially reduced in the fully funded schools. However, schools not fully funded and not implementing the complete program have not enjoyed comparable success.

Combination Classes, Year-round Education, and Ungraded Schools

In addition to implementing new curriculum and instructional practices in the primary grades, a few schools had implemented structural changes to meet the needs of their early elementary students more effectively.

Some schools were implementing combination classes (K/1/2, K/1, and Head Start/K/1) in conjunction with developmentally appropriate instruction. Most of them were trying to implement multigraded classrooms on a pilot basis. Policies varied as to whether the student should stay with the same teacher for more than one year. Because the classrooms offered instruction at more than one level, the pressure to retain was diminished.

Year-round schools have also demonstrated their usefulness in preventing retention due to excessive absences. Before initiating year-round schooling, the Oxnard Elementary School District reported poor attendance for Hispanic students who went to Mexico for six weeks during the winter. The district was able to reduce the absences of these students and their retention rate dramatically by providing the students with a school calendar allowing for a long vacation period in December and January. In addition, parents were reminded of the importance of school attendance when school resumed in January. Excessive absences at that time period have been reduced by approximately 90 percent.

Ungraded schools have been implemented in many different forms. The Ohlone Elementary School in Palo Alto has been operating an ungraded kindergarten through grade six school for over 15 years. Students progress

through the grades at their own pace. Except for kindergarten, all classes are two-year combination classes; students remained with the same teacher for the two-year period. The principal was enthusiastic about the ungraded approach. The flexibility permitted in placing students in different grade configurations and the freedom given teachers to try new ideas were cited as benefits. At Ohlone Elementary School it was found that about four of every 400 students or only 1 percent need more than six years to complete the first through sixth grade curriculum.

Recommendations

THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS ARE PROPOSED TO REDUCE THE STATEWIDE retention rate and offer more effective educational programs for immature and low-performing students at risk of retention in California:

- School districts and schools should examine their policies and practices on retention in light of current research.
- School districts and schools should disseminate research on retention to elementary and middle school staffs.
- School districts with high retention rates should develop a plan to reduce the rate of retention and improve the instructional program for students at risk of retention.
- School districts should monitor the progress of schools in reducing retention rates, including the differential effects of retention for different ethnic groups, non-English-speaking children, and boys and girls.
- The Department of Education and the Legislature should explore ways of providing financial incentives to school districts to reduce retention rates. Given the high cost to the state for retention, the incentives would result in net savings.
- The Department of Education and the Legislature should provide support to school districts to implement effective early intervention reading programs that have demonstrated cost savings by reducing retention and referrals to special education.

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